



PROJECT MUSE®

Ideologies in Children's Literature: Some Preliminary Notes

Ruth B. Moynihan

Children's Literature, Volume 2, 1973, pp. 166-172 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/chl.0.0190>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/245850>

IDEOLOGIES IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: SOME PRELIMINARY NOTES

Ruth B. Moynihan

Stories told or written for children are often indicators of the dominant values within a society. Various times and cultures reveal various attitudes, not only towards children but also toward life and society. As a Swedish specialist in children's literature recently said,

Every age has felt the need to provide new instructions in its children's books on how life is to be lived. Thus children's books do not merely reflect the contemporary social scene and the problems of adult life; the simplified manner in which they treat their subjects also makes them something of magnifying glasses.¹

The number of such magnifying glasses in our modern world is greater than ever before in history. An adequate discussion even of a particular era in one society could well be a major study. The purpose of this brief essay is merely to point out a few examples and to indicate some possibilities for further investigation.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, published in 1900 by Lyman Frank Baum, is one of the best known of American children's stories, but few have given much thought to the way in which its characters and plot reflect the political and social situation of the time. However, an article by Henry M. Littlefield recently described in detail the way the book serves as a populist parable. The Scarecrow, for example, represents Midwestern farmers, while the Tin Man represents the honest laborers bewitched by Eastern industrialists (personified in the Wicked Witch of the East). The Cowardly Lion is a parody of William Jennings Bryan. The Wizard, says Littlefield, "might be any President from Grant to McKinley. He come straight from the fair grounds in Omaha, Nebraska, and he symbolizes the American criterion for leadership—he is able to be everything to everybody."² But Dorothy's innocence and her loving kindness, along with the brains, heart, and courage of her friends (which were within them all along though they didn't know it), are sufficient to unmask even the formidable Wizard and to achieve Dorothy's goals—the freedom of her friends and her own return to reality among her hard-working relatives in Kansas.

If we compare The Wizard of Oz to the English classic for children, Winnie the Pooh, the contrast is startling. A. A. Milne's story takes place in a sheltered circumscribed world, the easy-going world of the English upper classes, where one lone child might live on a huge green estate with a dozen stuffed animals for playmates, and in a fantasy world where he himself was in complete control. Baum's book, on the other hand, reveals a world full of conflict and

danger where the heroine lives in a harsh grey world with only a little dog for a playmate (but a live dog, not a stuffed one) and can only escape into fantasy by being hit on the head in a tornado. Furthermore, even the fantasy world is full of dangers and harrowing experiences. Dorothy and her friends must deal with events as they occur, while Milne's characters generally frame or manipulate events according to their own expectations.

Winnie the Pooh, published in England in 1926, has been tremendously popular in America as well, though perhaps not as influential as The Wizard of Oz. It is better known to the intelligentsia, probably, while Oz is better known to the "common man." Pooh reflects a disillusionment with the pre-World War I world and its leadership. It is a sustained low-key spoof on official bureaucracies, the adult world in general, and the adventure and travel tales of nineteenth century imperial Britain. Where many earlier fairy tales were full of seriousness and took pretentiousness for granted as necessary and good, A. A. Milne's tales are all humor—especially in regard to pretensions. The ideology is that of a bumbling imperfect world, though a generally kind-hearted and not at all dangerous one.

Let us look at one chapter as an illustration. Chapter VIII, called "In Which Christopher Robin Leads an Expedition to the North Pole," reveals even through its title its deliberate parody of such earlier literature as Robinson Crusoe or the works of Robert Louis Stevenson.

This particular story concerns an expedition to the North Pole which Christopher Robin is planning. When asked by Pooh Bear what it is, Christopher says, "It's just a thing you discover," since he isn't quite sure himself, and then goes on to explain that all his friends can come because "that's what an Expedition means. A long line of everybody." Pooh goes off to gather the friends and they set off. After passing a "dangerous" part of the river where Christopher claims there might be an "ambush," they settle down in the first grassy area to eat their provisions—the best part of the "expedition" to most of the participants. After Christopher takes Rabbit aside to check with him about just what the North Pole might look like, the crisis event occurs. Baby Roo falls in the water while washing his face. He thinks he's swimming, while everyone else tries desperately to rescue him. Finally Pooh rescues Roo with a long pole and is informed by Christopher Robin that he has also discovered the North Pole. They put a sign on the Pole to that effect and go home. Pooh, "feeling very proud of what he had done, had a little something to revive himself."

Within the story, each character carries a message, too. Eeyore, the donkey, is the complaining old, self-centered, hypocritical relative with whom society must be patient and forgiving. He doesn't ask things, he just tells people. He comes along only "to oblige" and everything is "all the same" to him, though when things start moving he says, "Don't Blame Me." He's a perennial wet blanket, full of self-pity, an eater of thistles who assumes that Pooh sits on them

on purpose to keep them away from him. He preaches consideration, which he does not practice, and he "don't hold with all this washing" of Roo—"This modern Behind-the-ears nonsense." Finally, he's totally useless despite his painful efforts when it comes to rescuing Roo. The message is that the older generation is generally irrelevant, but well-meaning, and one must be nice to its members.

Owl is the intellectual who always knows about things, like the meaning of "ambush," and who tells "Interesting Anecdotes full of long words like Encyclopedia and Rhododendron" while his listeners fall asleep with boredom. In the emergency he explained that "in a case of Sudden and Temporary Immersion the Important Thing was to keep the Head Above Water," while the others hurried to the rescue. His knowledge is always either obvious or useless or both, but he is respected just for thinking and for his slightly mysterious potential usefulness.

Kanga is a spoof on motherhood. While she "explained to everybody proudly that this was the first time [Roo] had ever washed his face himself," he fell in the water and had a glorious time while she worried. The only female in the story, she represents a complacently sexist viewpoint—all women are mother figures and mothers are rather a nuisance most of the time. Piglet is a lovable coward in a world where there is nothing to be afraid of, while Rabbit has an unseemly number of relatives—message: fecundity is not really proper. Pooh is, of course, a "Bear of little brain"—the good and average person, and happily so. Presumably, the reader identifies with Christopher Robin, the paternalistic natural leader and protector simply by virtue of his superior birth, even though he is not much smarter or more capable.

It seems clear that this North Pole Expedition is intended to parody the great exploratory polar expeditions of the previous fifty years, especially those of Admiral Robert E. Peary. Peary had planned and provisioned several expeditions during the 1890's and even took his wife and new-born baby along. The Peary Arctic Club consisted of a few of his friends helping him towards his goal. Finally, on his sixth attempt in 1909, with much publicity, Peary succeeded in planting the American flag at the desolate site of the Pole. Milne's plot is debunking the imperial myth while preaching an easy-going, live-and-let-live myth. The leader doesn't know where he's going or what he's looking for, his friends and followers are mainly concerned with eating and enjoying themselves, the minor crisis as well as the major quest is resolved purely by accident by a bumbling good-natured hero, and everything is happy and okay because they all really love one another. The message is that goals don't matter so long as everyone enjoys himself and is kind to one another along the way. And in a way, the whole book suggests that reality itself, whatever that may be, doesn't matter much either if everyone is happy.

American books on the other hand, are usually firmly rooted in some aspect of reality and in the pursuit of specific goals. For example, The Little Engine That Could by Watty Piper, published in 1930 (and regularly reprinted ever since), clearly reflects the official optimism with which most of the nation entered the depression. Even though the "happy little engine," carrying all sorts of toys

and good food to the children on the other side of the mountain, had broken down, apparently irreparably, and even though the shiny new Passenger Engine and the big strong Freight Engine and the Rusty Old Engine refused to help, the Little Blue Engine which had never been over the mountain at all was willing to try. And, of course, it succeeded. As Hoover told the nation at that time, it was the willingness of all the little people to make temporary sacrifices and work a little harder which would soon solve the problems of the depression. And Roosevelt too, after 1933, as most historians agree, set all the little engines to work without really changing the system for wealth and industry.

The American myth of innocence, goodness and determination which was so much a part of The Wizard of Oz is revealed again in this simple book. Furthermore, it implies that there is no need to be more than temporarily sad at the refusals of big business or wealth or the older generation (whose interest in toys and good food for children could not really be expected anyway), since there is bound to be a "little Blue Engine" who is equally capable and glad to help. The world of great passenger and freight engines is not really our concern. If we just keep hoping and trying, everything will be all right. There is nothing wrong with the system, only with small parts within it. "I think I can, I think I can" became the motto of a whole generation of depression parents and their children, while society's general structure remained unchanged.

A similar message shines out of The Little House by Virginia Lee Burton, winner of the Caldecott Award in 1942. An extremely simple, but endearing, story of the life history of a little house overwhelmed by urbanization and industrialization, the story is clearly a parable about the development of American society. This little house which had weathered the seasons for an untold number of years sees the beginning of the destruction of its country idyll with the coming of the first horseless carriage "down the winding country road." Inexorably, the car is followed by steam shovels, highways, houses, tenements, trolleys, subways, skyscrapers, and abandonment. "No one wanted to live in her and take care of her any more," but she remained because she was so well-built. Furthermore, her wise original builder had said, "This Little House shall never be sold for gold or silver and she will live to see our great-great-grandchildren's great-great-grandchildren living in her."

It is this stipulation which suggests that the house represents something more than just rural life. The house stands for a whole civilization and perhaps also for the American Constitution—the system of government which many conservatives felt was threatened by the New Deal as well as by increasing industrialization. The story preaches a nostalgia for the past and the rural innocence of snow and stars and apple trees and daisies. And when "the great-great-granddaughter of the man who built the Little House so well" recognized "the shabby Little House" in the midst of the hurly-burly city, there was an obvious solution—move it to the country. "Never again would she be curious about the city . . . A new moon was coming up . . . It was Spring . . . and all was quiet and peaceful in the country."

The flight to suburbia as a return to innocence and beauty is the message of The Little House. The world of the past was better, while the city and all of modern industrialization is evil and dirty. Nor is there any possible compromise or evolution, only escape. Even the class element is quite blatant, for it is only the well-to-do who can stop all the traffic to move a house out of the city. In this case it is also an "old" family, a fifth-generation family in 1942, which is thus representative of only a very small proportion of the population. (Interestingly enough, at approximately thirty years per generation, this also makes the house the same age as the Constitution.)

Horton Hears a Who! by Dr. Seuss, published in 1956, is a fantasy in form, but its ideology is very goal-oriented and socially concerned. While Winnie the Pooh centered on the on-going happiness of a group of mutually respectful but self-contained individuals, and The Little House on a nostalgic recreation of a lost rural past, Horton is, above all, concerned with the individual's crucial role as a member of society. And it is a society full of conflicts and antagonism, with constant crises and dangers, and social pressures of every sort.

The plot of Horton is very simple. A benevolent elephant hears a voice from a small speck of dust and immediately feels obligated to help and protect it "Because, after all, / A person's a person, no matter how small." This refrain is repeated again and again as the elephant faces one crisis after another. First some kangaroos mock him, then some monkeys steal the clover with the speck of dust on it. They give it to Vlad Vlad-i-koff the "black-bottomed eagle" who obligingly flies off with it and drops it in a 100-mile wide field of clover. Horton toils after it "with groans, over stones / That tattered his toenails and battered his bones" and then picks three million clovers before he discovers his speck of dust. The people on the speck are in real trouble (like the dolls and toys on the little train) because they had "landed so hard that our clocks have all stopped. / Our tea-pots are broken. Our rocking-chairs smashed. / And our bicycle tires all blew up when we crashed." Horton promises once again to "stick by you small folks through thin and through thick!" But the kangaroos have decided to rope and cage the elephant for "chatting with persons who've never existed" and for "Such carryings-on in our peaceable jungle!" Furthermore, they are going to boil the dust speck in Beezle-Nut oil. (How mild was the disdain of the big Engines for the toys in comparison!)

The action now shifts to the people of Who-ville on the speck, since Horton can no longer protect them. Their only hope, and his, lies in shouting enough to make even the kangaroos hear. As Horton puts it, "you very small persons will not have to die / If you make yourselves heard! So come on, now, and TRY!" They do try—desperately—but without success, until the Mayor "discovered one shirker," a very small one who "Was standing, just standing, and bouncing a Yo-Yo!" He lectured the lad that this was the "town's darkest hour! The time for all Whos who have blood that is red / To come to the aid of their country!" Finally, "that one small, extra Yopp put it over" and the Whos "proved they ARE persons, no matter how small. / And their whole world was saved by the Smallest of ALL!"

The ideological message of this story is so blatant that one is tempted to interpret it almost too specifically. For example, it seems to reflect the Cold War mentality of the Fifties—especially in the name of its arch-villain, the Eagle. It also teaches the general virtue of responsible paternalism—the big should take care of the little, the comfortable should protect the oppressed, no matter how great the cost. And then it further preaches that an individual's value is determined not by his own pleasure (playing with Yo-Yo's), but only by his contribution to the whole, his active participation in achieving the goals of his society.

Horton is not a "middle-of-the-road" story. The preservers of the status quo are the kangaroos, and they are clearly evil. They also represent the pressures for social conformity and against "hearing voices." The ideal which Horton represents is that of the sensitive, spiritual, artistic, dedicated lone defender of humanity with all the world against him. There is a similarity to the Little Engine of 1930, but Horton is far less humble and the stakes are much higher. This is a life-and-death struggle, not just a matter of toys and good food. Horton's non-conformism is shown as right because it is in a good cause benefiting others—just playing and minding one's own business like the Who with the Yo-Yo is clearly immoral. (Winnie the Pooh characters would certainly be frowned upon in the Horton value system.)

One may suggest that Horton represents the messianic idealism which has been for so long a part of American tradition—with periodic eruptions on both the right and the left in internal affairs, and, in the twentieth century especially, on the international scene as well. Nixon, Johnson, and Kennedy could claim to be identified with Dr. Seuss's dedicated elephant just as well as Ellsberg, Dr. Spock, and Daniel Berrigan. Radical fighters for social justice come right out of the mainstream of American ideology, and violent confrontations are an accepted part of our world view.

In another way, Horton reveals the two main themes of a mass democratic society—the paradoxical importance of individual resistance to mass pressure for evil but cooperation with mass pressure for good. In such a society neither the large "elephant" nor the small "Who" is safe without the help of the other—and both are always in danger.

From the debunking of the Wizard in Oz and of the Empire in Pooh, America moved to an idealization of hopeful struggle in the face of difficulties in The Little Engine and of older rural values in the face of modernization in The Little House. And then in the Fifties we became newly aware of the irreconcilable conflicts of our mass modern society and also of the impossibility of escape. A study of our children's literature in its historical context might have forecast both a Viet Nam type encounter and the youthful upheaval of the Sixties. Both adults and students were acting out the values they had absorbed at an early age. And those values were taught by their own parents and in their own books. An analysis of the most popular children's literature indeed provides a magnifying glass for its society.

NOTES

- 1 Mary Orvig, "One World in Children's Books ?" The May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture, Top of the News, June, 1972, p. 40.
 - 2 "The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism," American Quarterly, 16, (1964), 54.
-



"Maximilian Pfeiferling" (see page 182)

Sketch of a scene from a REICHSKABARETT play.